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# THE STAR WAVE TEST DEVELOPED BY URSULA AVÉ-LALLEMANT

*Fiorenza Magistrali*

Translated by Sharon Huber and Mary Errera

**ABSTRACT:** The Star Wave Test, in which children are asked to “draw a sky full of stars above waves of water,” presents the essential elements of graphology and provides a graphic means of understanding the psychological world of children. The author explains the criteria for different test interpretations, the structure and symbolism of space and the implication of stroke qualities evident in the test, as well as its application.

## INTRODUCTION

It's been said that a child's drawing is a piece of his soul exposed on paper.<sup>1</sup>

After numerous observations it is now a supported fact that all children's drawings have a spontaneous graphic language, a genuineness that makes it easy to identify their psychological world.

When a child draws, he documents his psychomotor capacity, the level of coordination in executing the elements in his representation. The drawing also demonstrates his level of observation, memory and attention span, as well as his knowledge. Since the drawing spontaneously reproduces what takes place in his mind, the representation of the drawing gives us a true idea of the mind's process and phases.

Handwriting, unlike drawing, has a conventional graphic language. It is learned by copying a model. The child first learns the forms of letters which are then dominated by his psychomotor expression.

For this reason, a combination of handwriting and some drawing tests has long been used as a diagnostic method by the *Dynamische Graphologie in der Psychodiagnose* (Association for Dynamic Graphology in Psychodiagnosis.)



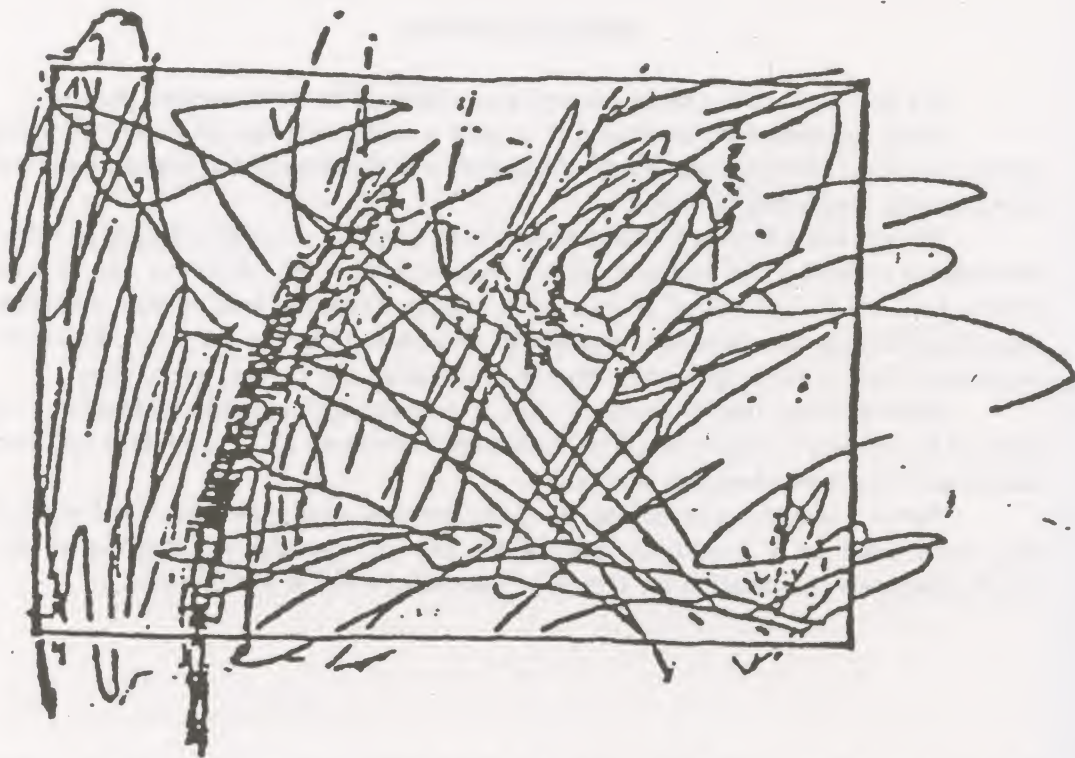
### **DRAW A SKY FULL OF STARS ABOVE THE WAVES OF THE SEA**

The Star Wave Test (SWT), developed by Ursula Avé-Lallemant, represents an intermediate position between unstructured drawing and handwriting.

Preparation for giving the test is very easy. The children to be tested are seated by themselves at separate tables so as not to influence each other. It is very important that the environment be peaceful and that the test be presented as a game so the children will not feel the pressure of being tested.

Start the presentation saying "Draw a sky full of stars above waves of water." This way they can depend on their own interpretation of something they have seen. The paper we give the children to draw on is 21 x 15 cm (8 1/4 x 5 7/8 inches) in size, white with a black border around its rectangle, leaving 15 x 10 1/2 cm (5 7/8 x 4 1/8 inches) for white drawing space.

We give adults and older children a choice of pencil, for very young children we give a #2 medium hardness pencil. Never, in any case, should colored ink or pencils, or ballpoint pens be used.



**Figure 1: Up to three years of age a child can only scribble, but through this test we can see how the child develops his individual character.**

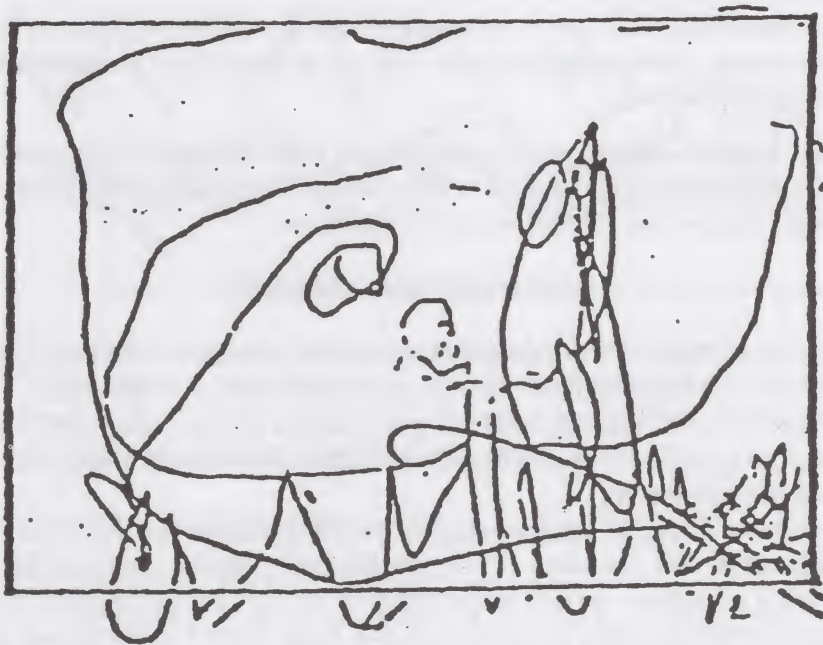
The response to the task given is the comprehension and representation of the stars and waves as they relate to the top and bottom of an outlined space.

It is a test that presents the essential elements of diagnostic graphology. This is demonstrated in the form and structure the child creates in his representation of the stars, movement of the waves, and the distribution of space in his representation of the starry sky above the sea. In graphology, these three elements connect and are looked at in relationship to each other while in the SWT they are looked at separately.

The frame on the paper serves to limit the graphic space in which movement and form can be expressed.

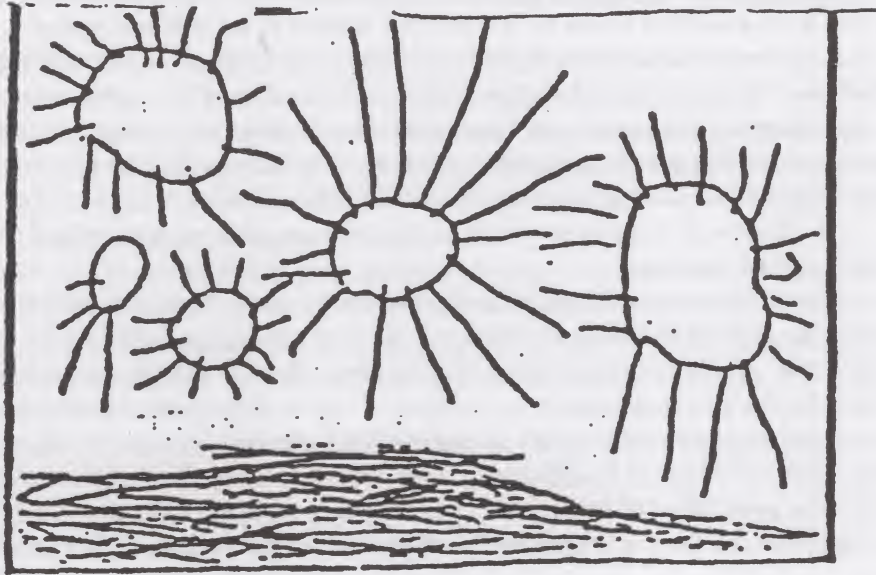
The SWT was conceived of and designed in a way that immediately exposes the contents of a child's deepest feelings, unconscious fears and conflicts. The stars and the water are archetypes in man. They refer to themes of light and of spirit of life and soul. In the test they appear as symbols of grand existential significance.

Avé-Lallemant had a way of saying "If I present the combination of handwriting, with a battery of the Wartegg, Tree, the Star Wave Tests, I do it above all to indicate the possibility of integrating handwriting analysis with three other means rich in expression. They are precious for the graphologists because they can be amply



**Figure 2:** Between three and four years of age a child can draw inside the borders of the frame and can already understand the assignment. The stars and waves are incorporated in his scribble.





**Figure 3: Between four and five years of age a child is capable of fulfilling the assignment. This demonstrates that he is capable of understanding, imagining, producing.**

included in graphic expression. The scope that it gives applies particularly to the graphological diagnosis; therefore, it is these tests with these drawings that integrate the graphic evidence and reveal the unconscious to us."<sup>2</sup>

### CHILDREN AND THE SWT

Above all, the SWT is intended for children in order to establish from a very young age the first signs of disturbances and characteristics of the child.

From research done in 1983 we were able to see that five year old children from European countries (therefore, one year before they attend school) were capable of fulfilling the assignment<sup>3</sup>.

Even handicapped children can do the SWT.<sup>4</sup> Ulrike Kohlschutter, psychologist, graphologist and president of the Studienkreis (Study Circle) of Monaco and Helga Wolff, a physician, carried out a study on 131 children in Monaco of which 44 had Downs Syndrome. They observed that the handicapped children had the potential to respond to the SWT (Figure 4). I myself am doing the same experimental investigation in Florence, Italy.

The SWT has demonstrated itself to be productive for three reasons:

1) The instructions for the exercise are clear and easy to understand.

- 2) The child can easily imagine the stars on the waves.
- 3) The drawing is done in a three dimensional space.

In my experience, the children rarely showed resistance. Usually they stop with their heads in the clouds. They may need more explanations, but then they draw with ease even if they seem far away from their habitual environment.

It is for those reasons that the SWT is also suitable for children with Down's Syndrome. It is a test of expression and projection, something which is of great interest to us because it reflects how a child with Down's Syndrome can get in touch with the world, and because it shows signs of suffering or psychological difficulties.

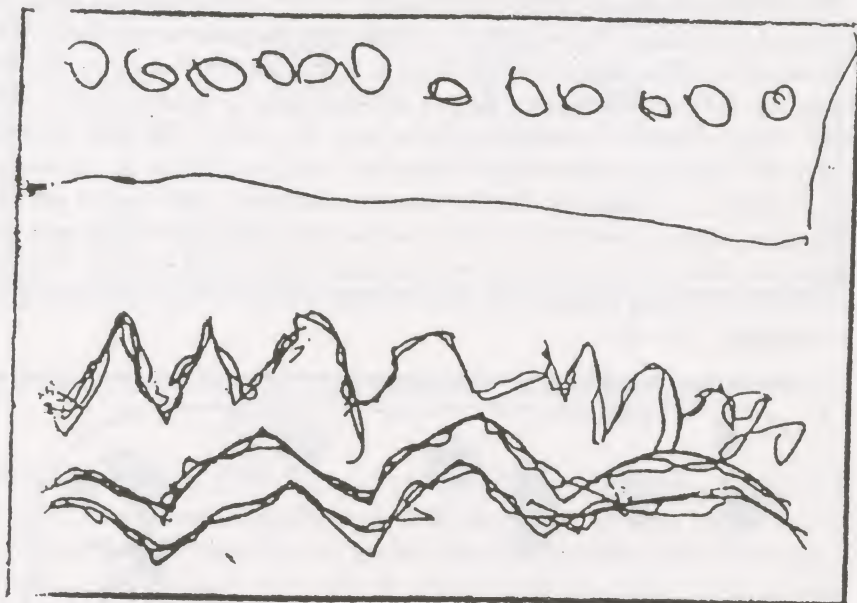


Figure 4: The child becomes fully emersed and motivated in the complexity of the SWT. We can see that there is a certain understanding, but there are also problems in the "*campo animico*," the emotional life: a disturbance or irritation expressed in the contracted, shrunken waves.

### THE SWT AS A FUNCTIONAL TEST

There are various ways of reacting to this test.

If the task is not carried out and the child gives back the paper, except in an isolated case of abstinence, we can assume that the child is not yet ready to do the task.

If only a part of the task has been done, leaving out only the stars or only the waves, it could signify that the capacity to understand both concepts at the same time is still absent. A partial execution of the task does not necessarily imply an inability to perform the task. A child could be so impressed by the word "stars" or "waves" to

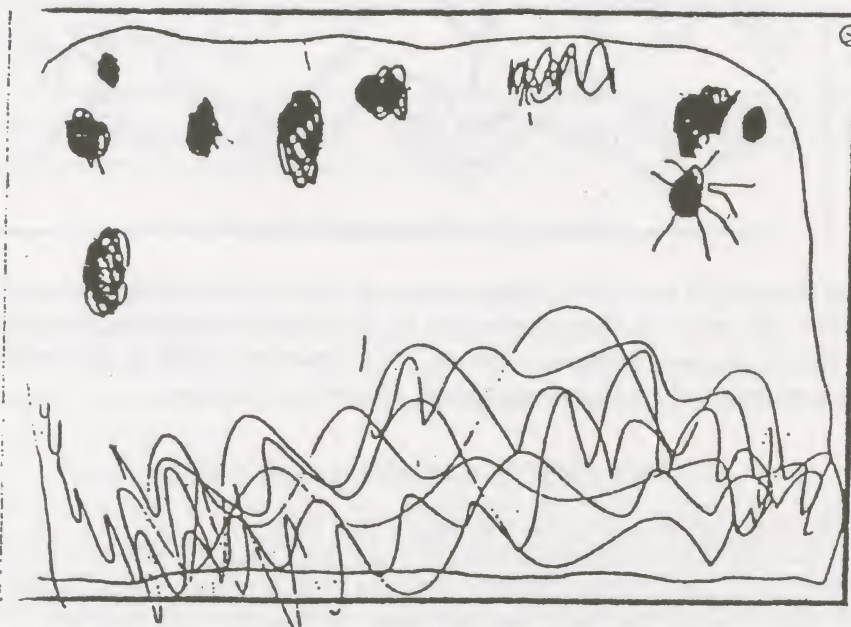


the point of not leaving any room for the other concept. Above all, this happens when the frame of the drawing paper is filled beyond the limits with well-shaped stars or waves. However, where adults are concerned, an incomplete presentation could be a sign of disturbance. In this case, it would be necessary to give supplementary testing that would give new and complementary information.

If the stars are drawn in a confused manner or intertwined with the waves, then fantasy prevails over rational thought: the structuring within the space and the orientation of the stars and waves are in contradiction. We find this mostly in children of an age who listen to fairy tales.

If by chance there are added images, they only mean that the child feels a joy in creating and inventing. There isn't any particular diagnostic emphasis to be given.

In regard to this subject I would like to introduce the test done by a four-year-old Chinese boy. He was vibrating with joy at being able to draw a picture with "stars and waves" using a pencil. It would be for a lady "far away". He also wanted to sign it. It is from his signature that we can note how the test offers, in its purely formal standard of stroke, a rendering that is spontaneous. Also, the use of pencil gives a sense of freedom which contributes to the spontaneity. From the image and form there is confirmation of the formal expressive characteristics in his writing. The signature and the drawing indicate richness in their contents even if they are from someone of such a young age.



**Figure 5:** Here the test is executed in a completely different way. The curly waves do not indicate any disturbances, but the stars show difficulty in understanding.





**Figure 6: Star-Wave-Test and the signature of a four-year-old Chinese boy**

Before presenting SWT Figure 7, I would like to clarify the situation in which it was taken. I met these little Chinese children in the nursery school of a little village near Xian. The children did not know what the sea was, and I brought the children outside to the Square where there was a water fountain gushing into a pool. There I had them wave the water with their hands. Avé-Lallemant affirms that all the children know what waves are even if it is simply from their experience in the bathtub. In this child's test, the waves couldn't possibly exist without a spurt or gush from above (as with the experience in the fountain.) We note that these waves are a bit of a problem for the child. We can see the lack of uniformity of the graphic image. The inner dimension is not well structured. It is uncertain with regard to the character, the condition, the complex intensity: complexity caused by insecurity and tension.

That is why we always note separately and immediately how the test is performed. This way, from the beginning, a "symbol interpretation" is evident. This solution will be considered at the time of evaluation.



**Figure 7: SWT of a five-year-old Chinese child.**

### **THE CRITERIA FOR THE INTERPRETATION**

The criteria for interpreting the SWT corresponds exactly to those used in graphology. As we analyze the appearance of handwriting according to its harmony, regularity and disharmony, this is how we proceed with the SWT drawing.

This is also valid for evaluating the solution categories, namely, the ways to express the contents<sup>5</sup> which can be numerous.<sup>6</sup>

#### **Content or Object Interpretation**

The object is considered a rational solution, depicting pure and simple juxtaposition of stars and waves. It is the solution in which the subject has no intention of giving some deep significance or impression to his drawing.

#### **Pictorial or Figurative Interpretation**

Here the subject pays attention to his drawing. The object is placed relative to other objects so as to form a complete image.

#### **Mood Interpretation**

This solution can only be accurately verified after puberty. It allows us to recognize the predominance of an anemic disposition.



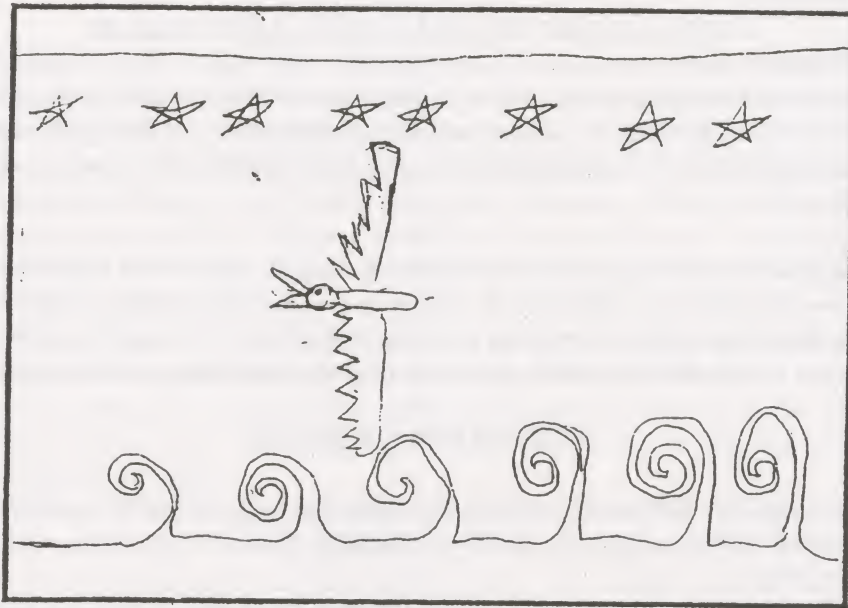
### **Form Interpretation**

In this solution the representation is simplified with a stylized geometric solution or decorative forms. This has a tendency to occur frequently in the teenage years of personality development.

### **Symbol Interpretation**

This category expresses, above all, the relationship towards the psychology of the unconscious. It, in fact, implicitly and explicitly contains a symbolic indication of the meanings that have to be understood or interpreted in the context of the subject's actual situation.

Finally, we also need to note that these solution categories are not mutually exclusive and frequently overlap. In the case of Figure 8, the form and pictorial interpretations are represented.



**Figure 8: SWT of an Italian boy, 9 years, 9 months old**

## FORMAL STRUCTURE OF SPACE

Every drawing, independent of its contents, presents a formal structure in the space outlined by its borders. This is also valid for the SWT which obliges one to structure the space within its frame.

As with handwriting, the same is true for drawing, that in the course of time, individual factors and the type of structure learned is modified by the child giving the possibility of diagnostic interpretation.

**Harmonious structure** expresses a certain symmetry in the proportions, a harmonious distribution of the solid elements and of the outlines from which we can note a certain individuality. "It gives the impression of something naturally developed, not contrived."<sup>7</sup>

In the SWT this indicates a willingness of the subject to conform and adapt to the environment.

**Uniform structure** is one which is rationally controlled and presents a formal equilibrium.

**Regular structure** is presented when the child rigidly obeys organized rules, either obligated by pressures placed on an insecure child by others or as a psychological defense that leads him to compensate for his discomfort. In the SWT we can recognize the regularity of the spacial distribution in the uniform distance among single elements.

**Disharmonious structure** entails not only an absence of harmony but also an absence of regularity. Moreover, it results in a lack of uniformity. Such disharmony in the drawings and handwriting are frequently found during the puberty crisis, the phase in which children rebel and are confronted with the establishment.

## SYMBOLISM OF SPACE

It is within the spacial symbolism that the real evaluation of the contents start. We can observe how the drawing presents itself in the space according to Pulver's system.

The theme of the test itself tends to impose a vertical structure on the drawing. The SWT always requires a distinction between the top and bottom zones of the picture entailing a vertical interpretation and taking into account spacial expansion and emphasis. The proportions between these zones are also taken into consideration. Therefore, there is significance in the relationship or balance between the sky and



sea, the dominance of the sky or sea, the contraction of the sky and sea, an exaggerated space or an overlapping superimposition between the sky and sea.

If the sky is dominant, it symbolizes the soul (the spiritual or intellectual emphasis of the personality). If the water is dominant in its movement, it symbolizes emotions and receptiveness. An exaggeration or deemphasis of a spacial theme signifies that the subject had a conflict at some time.

If, for example, the waves are high enough to invade the star sector, we have to investigate the overlap between the two basic symbols to explain the theme. Water, a symbol of the senses, covers the light, a symbol of the spirit.

When there is contact at the horizon between the sky and sea, there is a strong perception of life. When the sky and sea are separated by a space in the middle, this perception is absent. In this case we attribute to the use of space various underlying causes. We must observe the movement of the waves and the formation of the stars. If the space between them is shaded, if this is evidenced only by a line of stars and water only on the lower margin, such a marked separation between the two zones is always a sign of disturbance. The superimposition of the sky and water stems from difficulty in differentiating thought from emotion.

### **HORIZONTAL STRUCTURE OF THE DRAWING**

Relative to the distribution of content within the horizontal structural dimension, spacial expansion and emphasis of content can have various interpretations. The content may have no horizontal emphasis or be emphasized on the left, right or middle. Horizontal emphasis is not normal given that the theme of the test doesn't impose any horizontal distribution. In regard to left emphasis, (Figure 9), a school psychologist from a center for refugee children has observed that a child who has not overcome the loss of his mother would leave the left side of the SWT empty. It is a gesture that implies internalization of emotion and projects an empty feeling inside as a result of his experience. Also significant are the stars made splendid by rays of light, drawn with a toned, spongy-like stroke. The moon always represents the artist when it is accentuated. In this case, it is executed with a firm stroke on the left and a toned and spongy stroke of the right.

However, if the content emphasis is more pronounced on the right half of the drawing, we can assume that the subject has problems making contact with his environment. An emphasis in the middle could signify that complex emotional and personal themes are predominant.

In all cases, but especially in this one, the horizontal emphasis needs to be interpreted in relation to the vertical indicators in order to better point out current difficulty.

### THE CENTER OF THE DRAWING

The middle is the starting point or the self's center of integration. Above all, the test is a valid indication for cases where there is a loss of centrality. We have three indications: not emphasized; emphasized from a spacial point of view; emphasized from a content point of view.

We have already seen that the test evokes a state of mind or mood, and it is significant when there is an emphasis in the middle.<sup>8</sup> Frequently we see a central star or a beautiful star with its lines well delineated which occupies the center of the SWT. There are a variety of very diverse meanings that explain the emphasis. If the star is executed in a very expressive way, we can think of a narcissistic theme. Then, it is clear that an existential problem could develop. Therefore, these images are inserted in the context of the drawing, focusing attention mainly on the conditions, forms and type of stroke used.



**Figure 9: SWT of an 8 year old Italian child**

### SYMBOLISM OF THE OBJECTS

Every type of object or being in our environment can become an objective symbol. As space has directional symbolic qualities from personal, real-life experiences, every object can have symbolic content.<sup>9</sup>



The spacial symbolism already allows us to interpret a line drawn on the right margin as an indication of a resistance from the outside. The children's tests that quickly go "off theme" and adapt the solution of the picture abound with images. Stones and rocks appear as symbolic obstacles, unsurpassed resistance; sinking boats as symbols of communication.

We can recognize an imbalance by the disturbance of the harmony in the overall picture or in the section with the stars or from the course of the waves. Waves harmoniously surging have a gentle effect and, at the same time, are receptive. We find tired, weak waves in passive people, and in those with depressive tendencies.

### **THE FORMALITY OF THE STROKE**

This reveals elements of the child's originality and psychological state at the moment. That is to say, integrated or disturbed as the elements may be, the composition of the form, the lines of movement, and the spacial arrangement of the single elements, along with the type of stroke, play a very big role. The different types of strokes may indicate some disturbances, as with regard to individual personality characteristics, even when the drawing as a whole is not disturbed. Let us observe four aspects.

#### **a. The Ductus of the Stroke**

The stroke can be secure, insecure, continuous, broken, a single line or pendular.

For interpreting the SWT, the single line and pendular strokes are the most interesting. They are inspired by the stars and waves. The other stroke types are used only occasionally. The single stroke is used for the stars and waves and the pendular stroke for the oscillating movement of the waves.

The single stroke is connected to the vitality of the child; the pendular stroke adds an additional dynamic to the single stroke and is a function of how well the child manages his emotional vitality. The broken stroke mainly comes from thoughtful, reflective subjects who put themselves under examination. The continuous stroke reveals that the subject gives himself a very well-defined objective and arrives at it directly, step by step. The insecure stroke indicates that the subject hesitates. His stroke trembles.

#### **b. The Character of the Stroke**

We have two basic strokes, those of weak pressure and those of strong pressure. We speak of a delicate stroke if it is fine. It indicates an empathic personality. A toned stroke which is pastose and wide indicates sensory receptivity. A toned-spongy stroke which is wide and uneven in shading reveals a symptom of disturbance indi-

cating too much need to attach to others and problems with affection. A sharp stroke, if the pencil stroke is fine, indicates rationality and a conscious self-control. A firm stroke, if the stroke is fine and secure, indicates a capacity to control impulses.

### **c. Disturbances of the Stroke**

Avé-Lallemant calls these disturbances stroke phenomena.<sup>10</sup>

The delicate-fragile stroke is a broken stroke, flaky, unsure, showing a hypersensitivity that is or could become disturbed.

The toned-spongy stroke has a disorderly effect. A blotch mark expresses a sensual receptiveness. We find this in insecure children looking for affection and contact.

The sharp-hard stroke which is fine with strong pressure leaves a groove in the paper indicates the forced strain to focus on ones intentions.

The firm-crude stroke if large with strong pressure assumes an uncontrollable instinct. We find this in adolescents after the start of puberty.

The fragmented stroke is the one most commonly found in handwriting because it appears when there are long lines of writing. It is the expression of nervous self-control.

The strongly blackened stroke is evidence of something specific in the drawing and in a very strong way it reveals unconscious fixation on that point.

### **d. The Treatment of the Surfaces**

Shaded surfaces emphasize the "climate of the drawing." The sensual receptivity here becomes an expression of the fluctuating state of mind.

Dotted line surfaces require a certain level of conscious control. Outlined surfaces indicate a need for deliberate control of the emotional contents. Where there are retraced strokes of outlined surfaces, the borders put an accent on the rational aspect.

Obscured surfaces are all those parts of the drawing highlighted or darkened in comparison with the shading. The results are expressions of their strong emotions. With younger children we naturally have to keep in mind that they are used to coloring and frequently want to replace the effect of the pencil with obscurities. Rough surfaces occur when segments of the stroke are executed in an inharmonic way, giving the impression of a scratched surface. Rough surfaces are interpreted as difficulty with personal contact.

From this first approach to the SWT we can already see how very attentive observation and an early analysis can prevent the child from having problems which could emerge later in life and result in negative consequences.

Living in a dynamic age that is experiencing a progressive transformation, and being influenced by the social family environment, the subject is very sensitive to the high degree of variation in the environment. It is best to correlate the knowledge of the child with the known facts of the environment in which he develops.



### A CONCRETE APPLICATION

So many emotions are contained and expressed in Figure 10! The whole of the drawing evokes an atmosphere of anxiety and a sense of struggle to reach an internal harmony which is lacking.

If we observe the test for a moment from the viewpoint of the symbolic relationship of the stars and waves, we are amazed at the shining appearance of the stars in the blackened waves that show no movement. We have before us a typical situation that evokes a mood state which, in any case, favors an interpretation of the content.



**Figure 10: SWT of a little girl from former Yugoslavia, 10 yrs. 5 mos.**

The drawing is executed with a very inventive use of space. The structure is not well-balanced. The lack of harmony in the proportions immediately helps us to see that we are looking at a very disturbed personality. In the vertical delineation of space, there is a forced dominance of the sky. Accent on the spiritual-intellectual sphere does not reflect an harmonious equilibrium.

The way in which the water is drawn demonstrates that the major emphasis is at the emotional level.

The horizontal formation is slightly towards the left, the area more attached to the past. The blackened waters are marked less on the left than on the right where

you can see small white spaces. On the right side towards the exterior we even have some color, as a barrier, pushing the right margin on the inside of the frame in a very tense, contracted way. The blackened vertical, feverish stroke in the waves on the right is evidence of not only internal disturbances but also that the cause of her conflicts should be looked for in her environment.

The water is almost defined by a light, soft and delicate wave line. Behind the water, in the middle area, rises a fountain of light from a hugh star, partially hidden by the horizon which integrates the opposing elements. A star that is large and central is usually, as we have already seen, an indication of self. The large size and position of this star (sun or celestial body?), surrounded by clouds is an expression of feelings towards self fluctuating between a search for self affirmation and the continuing presence of a frustrating emotional experience. (Even the star on the right side of the emerging light is surrounded by a darker blackened stroke. The wave line that separates the water from the sky was drawn with a fragile, delicate stroke.)

At this point it is clear that we have to examine the type of stroke used in this test carefully. This will give us an explanation and a confirmation. The character of the stroke oscillates between delicate-fragile, strong, sharp-fine to strong-spongy. The strong broken lines created by the hesitating stroke, which never expands into undulating forms, are at times clean-cut and sharp, at time strong and spongy, but always angular, expressing emotions and a sense of opposition that gives the subject an awareness of suffering. The stars are executed with angles, drawn with a dark, clear-cut, delicate stroke.

The stroke defining the stars presents a contrast with the relaxed delicate fragile stroke of the little waves and the clouds. This leaves us to imagine that the little girl is receptive but also irritable. The ductus of the single delicate stroke of the star before it becomes strong indicates a receptiveness that responds to solicitation. The whole of the clear, light star, drawn with a single, clean-cut stroke demonstrates how the little girl desires to dominate her nature in a conscious way with a vision of her problems. The aggression mentioned to me by the teacher could derive from trying to compensate for a sense of insecurity caused by insufficient orientation or more so, a manifestation of self-protection.

This little girl comes from former Yugoslavia. At night she keeps the light on while trying to get tired. The darkness reminds her of the war and all the rest.

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**BIOGRAPHY:** Fiorenza Magistrali currently works at La Scuola Superiore di Grafologia Moretti di Foggia in Italy where she is a professor of education and graphology for children, especially children with problems. Lately, she is also a consultant for distressed children in Sarajevo. She is a member of Verein fur Dynamische Graphologie in der Psychodyagnostik (Association for Dynamic Graphology in Psychodiagnosis) and has studied with Dr. Ursula Avé-Lallemant. In addition, she has translated Dr. Avé-Lallemaent's books *SterneWellen Test (Star Wave Test)* and *Notsignale in Schuleischriften (Alarm Signals)* into Italian. She received degrees in Pedagogy (1969), in Philosophy (1978) and in Graphology (1991) from the University of Urbino, Italy. She has lectured internationally in Prague, Athens, Munich and Ancona, Italy and written other articles about the Star Wave Test.